

Commentary

Broken Promise

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Carol was a professor of philosophy and religious studies at a local university, where she taught ethics to undergraduates. I had read one of her books and felt fortunate when, through mutual friends, I had the opportunity to meet her. She was a big woman with large, deeply set, dark eyes and an acerbic wit that at first put me off. Once we became friends, however, it didn't take me long to notice that her sarcasm shielded her from the scrutiny of others and kept people at a safe distance. Through the opaque vision of my naiveté, I wondered what secret such an accomplished and successful woman would have that needed hiding from others, as if success or accomplishment were pillars of inner strength.

Though not a "full-blown manic-depressive," Carol in her more manic phases wore brightly colored dresses and makeup and occasionally tried a new hair style. At these times, she was humorous, or downright funny, as she reverently and irreverently mocked some of the peculiarities of Judaism, her focus of study and faith by heritage. Perhaps because of her many years of teaching, she spoke flawlessly and quickly, responding to questions in a way that always sounded rehearsed. In her more usual depressive phases, Carol dressed in a way that announced her mental state: somber brown and maroon shapeless dresses, sandals, and limp unwashed hair; her doughy face bespoke sleepless nights. A basically loving person, she believed strongly that she was loved by no one and would never be loved by anyone. This was her tormenting legacy from childhood, thick layers of a Dickensian tapestry of misfortune.

It was only after several years of friendship that Carol disclosed to me the nature of her underlying mental illness. She saw it as a powerful vortex that was dragging her down to a consequence that she had accepted long ago. At that point, had I been more callous, I would have prevented the friendship from developing further; I knew even then that it would be a difficult relationship and that I was setting myself up for a deep hurt. But our friendship did climb to a higher plateau. She eventually felt safe enough to reveal to me things I wasn't sure at first I really wanted to know, particularly the horror of her abusive childhood. She shared them with me in the way I imagine people do in confession. But I was not a link in

her chain to God. Although Carol was a Judeo-Christian scholar who knew the Talmud by heart, she chose agnosticism as the most sensible way of viewing human existence. I will never know if this belief and its inherent nihilism played a part in her choice to end her life.

Over many a bottle of chardonnay, we talked. Rather, she talked and I listened to one sad tale after another. Her mother personified the wicked witch of folklore. The message she had received from her mother was that the universe had become a far sadder place after Carol's birth: "You're stupid; no one will ever love you. Look at you, go look in the mirror. How could anyone ever love an ugly bitch like you?" Then came the spitting in the face, the kicks when she lay on the floor wailing, and the silence in her lonely room, wondering what this was all about. The only truth a child knows comes from the lips of parents. A strong belief in her wretchedness was Carol's truth. It influenced all aspects of her life.

She once revealed that she had attempted suicide twice. Dress rehearsals, she jokingly called them. To me it was no joke. We talked about the famous suicides of writers, actors, and musicians, and I wondered what it must be like to have that much angst to disregard Hamlet's warning and annihilate oneself. Was there safety in darkness?

I have never before had a friend who committed suicide. Perhaps because I had always thought of myself as being cheerful and fun-loving, I never wanted to be associated with people who were outwardly depressed or moody. Always the teacher, though, Carol unknowingly taught me about her special types of secrets, the little devils that chip away at the firmament of the mind. Now that I have gone through life and the circle of my acquaintances has expanded, I realize that some of the people I have grown to like probably hide from me a dark corner of intense psychic pain that only shows itself privately. Perhaps there are many more such people than I can imagine. The masks we wear when we are around others are astounding.

Do people who suffer the way Carol did wonder if life is merely a prison from which escape is possible at any time? Does that knowledge give them solace? Do they ever consider another outlet for their pain? When the devils begin to jackhammer away at the integument

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of sanity, is there a steam valve? Not even Sylvia Plath, who tried to exorcise her demons with lush poetry, could keep them away. Carol dove ever deeper into her work, but it never seemed good enough, as if some unseen authority were judging her. I watched as she worsened. One day I suggested we get together for lunch. "I'll call you," she said. "When I'm free." That day never came. The call I got was from a mutual friend who said that Carol was in the intensive care unit, ventilated, not yet brain dead, but not expected to improve. Her coma had become her refuge from the exigencies of life.

People don't kill themselves because a girlfriend left or because their performance on the job is poor or because of a divorce. Suicide is a dramatic volitional act that is the symbol of something dark and loathsome hiding deep in the psyche. The proximate event is merely the last straw of a set of life experiences that propel some people to their end. Carol believed she would never measure up to other people's expectations, not just in love, but in teaching, research, friendship—everything. It was painful for her to exist with this belief. As much as I wanted to help her and show her that I was a friend who would always be there for her, she also knew

how hopeless and helpless she was.

At some point in our friendship, I had a strong feeling, just as she had, that her life would end this way. No matter how much we talked about it, no matter how many different medications she tried, and no matter how often she said she knew it, I could never convince her that I would be devastated if she were to die; she never thought her life could mean that much to others. Carol was not one to break a promise, so when she promised to call me if she ever again felt like killing herself, I felt relieved. But she broke her promise and is now in a coma on a ventilator.

Carol had enriched my life, but, sadly, the power of our friendship was no match to that of her depression. It is tragic to lose such a wonderful friend, but for her, I find myself curiously pleased. After a lifelong Sisyphean struggle against her psychic pain, she must have known she could never win. I would never want anyone to suffer as Carol had. When someone knows that the value of life is no longer worth the pain, whether psychic or somatic, it is time to let go. Had I been with her at the end, to hand her the wine to wash down the pills, it may have been the greatest moment we ever shared.